

Town of Island Heights
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
Southern terminus of County Road 627
North bank of Toms River
Island Heights
Ocean County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1018

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PHOTOGRAPH

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TOWN OF ISLAND HEIGHTS

HABS No. NJ-1018

Location: New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail, Southern terminus of County Road 627, North bank of Toms River, Island Heights, Ocean County, New Jersey.

Significance: The Methodist resort of Island Heights was founded in the late nineteenth century during a period of religious revival, advocating family values and temperance. John Wanamaker of the Wanamaker store-chain, brought further notoriety to Island Heights in the 1900s when he established a summer camp for members of his commercial institute.

History: Island Heights was named for geographical features that Methodist ministers found attractive in a camp meeting site. Situated at the mouth of Toms River, with a view of the bay from the highest point on the shore south of Highlands, Island Heights has a long history as a choice "camping" spot. Before the Methodists arrived in 1878, Indians spent their summers in the area. One local legend claims the river is named for Indian Tom, who settled on the bluffs of Island Heights. Known as Dr. Johnson's island in the seventeenth century and Dillon's Island in the eighteenth, the property was separated from the mainland by a northern channel before the Cranberry Inlet closed.

Nineteenth-century development began when the Reverend Jacob Graw established the Island Heights Association, a group of twelve members of the New Jersey Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church and seventeen businessmen. The association incorporated and purchased the property in July 1878. According to his son, "Dr. Graw did not undertake to establish a second Ocean Grove. That was impossible then and now. But he did undertake to build up a Christian family resort under temperance influences with the camp meeting as a special feature."¹ The association immediately began constructing the camp meeting grounds, roads, and docks, placing the auditorium in a clearing on the steep bluffs overlooking the water. Before the first camp meeting that August, "underbrush was removed from about ten acres; two avenues partly opened; a pavilion built; seats arranged for camp ground; thirty camp meeting cottages erected and a hotel commenced."² Within five years, the new resort was connected with the Camden-to-Seaside-Park-line by a branch of the Pennsylvania railroad.

Because the settlement grew from a carefully thought-out urban plan corresponding to the landscape, two distinct sections were created. Serpentine roads, like Camp Walk, crossed the eastern riverfront property, while the western end was blocked out in a regular grid. Small camp meeting cottages were built around the meeting ground or

¹ Kevin McGorty et al, "Island Heights," Ocean County Historic Sites Survey. (Toms River: Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission, 1981), 2.

² Edwin Salter, A History of Monmouth and Ocean Counties (Bayonne, N.J.: E. Gardner & Son, 1890; reprint, Ocean County N.J.: Ocean County Historical Society, n.d.), 407.

"tenting" area bounded by Simpson and Laurel avenues. Camp Meeting Walk encircles the site of the auditorium, now a playground with a view of the river through the pines. One of the original cottages, No. 129, still stands on the western side of the street.³ The western end of Island Heights, with its more grid like plots, was developed with more elaborate homes concentrated along the river bank.⁴ Larger Victorian houses decked out in gingerbread, Shingle Style and Gothic Revival cottages were built along River Avenue facing the water. In 1890, Philadelphia architect Henry Petit designed his own Queen Anne-style home, Arbutus Lodge, at 60 River Ave.

During the early years of settlement, the riverfront was developed to accommodate summer guests. A wharf provided space for yachts and hacks chartered by visitors and a 16' x 30' building was constructed to house the association's administration, a store and rooms for visiting ministers.⁵ The yacht club and pavilion, constructed early in the twentieth century, still provide a focal point for riverfront gatherings. The commercial district developed along Central Avenue, extending inland from a riverfront pavilion that served as a dock and community center. A variety of small businesses--the 1890 Tudor ice cream parlor, the old Island Heights Movie House and a Classical Revival drugstore--line the historic road.

John Wanamaker, the Presbyterian businessman responsible for popularizing Sea Grove, also contributed to the growth of Island Heights as a resort. In the early 1900s, Wanamaker established a summer camp for members of his commercial institute. Wanamaker chose a plot of land facing the bay for "the Barracks," a summer camp housing the employees enrolled in his Philadelphia and New York commercial institutes. Now boarded up and covered with asbestos shingles, the Headquarter's House, complete with battlements, giving it a military aspect, was once the center of the Wanamaker retreat. The "cadets" lived in tents surrounding fields where they performed military drills, army calisthenics and parades.⁶

Though still a dry town, Island Heights grew out of its religious roots into a popular family resort. By the early 1920s, the borough offered all the latest modern conveniences within a scenic location free from noisy seaside amusements. A promotional pamphlet published by the local board of trade boasts of Island Height's "splendid roads, concrete sidewalks, boardwalk, electric lights and gas, splendid supply of excellent water for domestic use, sewer system" and "more public docks

³ Eleanor Angott, "375 structures in Island Heights Nominated for Register of Historic Places," The Review (Seaside Heights, N.J. Thursday, September 2, 1982), 18.

⁴ McGorty, 1-2.

⁵ McGorty, 2.

⁶ Golden Book of the Wanamaker Stores, Jubilee Year 1861-1911 (John Wanamaker, 1911), 233.

than any other community in the state."⁷ Perhaps because of its quiet setting, the city attracted artists; painter John Frederick Peto first came to Island Heights in summer 1889 and played the coronet at a Methodist camp meeting. Many years later, Peto returned to build his studio at 102 Cedar Ave. One of his works, still hanging in his studio, depicts a letter addressed to his daughter in Island Heights. Describing the resort in their promotional guide of 1920, the Central Committee of the Barnegat Bay Boards of Trade emphasized Island Height's exclusive population sequestered in the pines overlooking the water.

The first day here you'll write back home that you've discovered the Ideal Spot. Every condition is favorable to rest and enjoyment, health, convenience and economy. The masses know nothing of the wonders of Barnegat Bay, and it is for the purpose of keeping the summer colony as select as possible that instead of heralding our fame through the press of the country we have compiled this booklet and mail it to those whom we care to reach.⁸

Even today, without the religious influence, Island Heights retains an aura of privacy and spiritual peace. Naturally protected from the traffic along Route 9 and the Garden State Parkway, the city offers a sense of what late nineteenth-century resorts might have been like.

Prepared by: Sarah Allaback
HABS Historian
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Sources: Angott, Eleanor. "375 structures in Island Heights Nominated for Register of Historic Places." The Review (Seaside Heights, N.J.) 2 September 1982, n.p.

"Barnegat Bay Resorts." Asbury Park: Schuyler Press, 1920.

Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration. New Jersey: A Guide to its Present and Past. New York: Public Library of Newark and New Jersey Guild Associates, Viking Press, 1939.

Golden Book of the Wanamaker Stores, Jubilee Year 1861-1911. Copyright 1911 by John Wanamaker.

McGorty, Kevin et al. "Island Heights," Ocean County Historic Sites Survey. Toms River: Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission, 1981.

⁷ "Barnegat Bay Resorts" (Asbury Park: Schuyler Press, 1920), 5.

⁸ "Barnegat Bay Resorts."

Salter, Edwin. A History of Monmouth and Ocean Counties. Bayonne, N.J.: E. Gardner & Son, 1890; reprint, Ocean County N.J.: Ocean County Historical Society. [n.d.]

Project Information:

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